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ABSTRACT

The three-stage EPS (Elite-Popular-Specialized) model of mass communication system development has been an accepted model among media scholars for 25 years. Media history in developed countries as well as recent experience in the developing nations has shown the applicability of the model under many different conditions. The recent and rapid spread of digitized media, utilizing a number of different channels, suggests that it is appropriate to extend the EPS model to include a fourth stage, that of individualized media. Although it is still too early to fully document the progression of media systems toward the individualized stage, it appears likely that the media systems of several developed countries may be on the verge of this advanced stage. This paper examines the conditions necessary for the individualized stage to develop, as well as the distinctive characteristics of the individualized stage of development. Contains 18 references. (Author/RS)

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BEYOND THE EPS MEDIA DEVELOPMENT MODEL

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ABSTRACT

The three-stage EPS model of mass communication system development has been an accepted model for 25 years. Media history in developed countries as well as recent experience in the developing nations has shown the applicability of the model under many different conditions. The recent and rapid spread of digitized media, utilizing a number of different channels, suggests that it is appropriate to extend the EPS model to include a fourth stage, that of individualized media. Although it is still too early to fully document the progression of media systems toward the individualized stage, it appears likely that the media systems of several developed countries may be on the verge of this advanced stage. This paper examines the conditions necessary for the individualized stage to develop, as well as the distinctive characteristics of the individualized stage of development.

Beyond the EPS Media Development Model

The media are no strangers to change. After several centuries of relatively slow development in the letterpress printing tradition, communication of information began to move with the speed of electricity and the ease of radio waves before the advent of the twentieth century. With these developments, there was no reversing or slowing the trend. In quick succession came the national and international telephone systems, movie distribution, radio networks, national television, cable TV, cellular telephone, Internet and personal communication systems. The pace has quickened to the point where one technology seems to barely gain a foothold before it is joined and sometimes superseded by another. National and international communications environments often seem less like systems and more like chaos.

Chaos or not, various media scholars have devised models and systems by which to classify and analyze national media environments. It is useful to build models of media systems to compare them across national borders as well as track their development through time. Modeling may often help to explain what is happening within such systems, as well.

One of the classic models is the political approach of Siebert, Peterson and Schramm (1963), which categorizes national media systems in terms of ownership, control, freedom and purposes. Although out of date in some respects, it remains a useful starting point for many scholars concerned with political communication. Hachten (1992) uses a similar but updated typology with an additional category. Davison, Boylan and Yu (1976) classify systems on three dimensions: satisfaction of individual vs. collective needs, degree of government vs. private control, and degree of sophistication and diffusion.

These dimensions incorporate elements of political, social, and economic conditions. Stephens (1991) examines similar criteria.

Lyle and McLeod (1993), surveying and assessing technological developments, emphasize the functional bases of mass media, which they list as survival, coordination of response, transgenerational transfer, and entertainment. These functional attributes could just as well be used to classify media systems. Mattelart (1994) identifies three functions: the expressive function, the economic function, and the rhetorical function. The McBride Commission (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 1980), although not specifically concerned with media system classification or modeling, examined development-related attributes such as media integration, diversity, technological advancement, organizational concentration, and access and participation, all of which could be used as standards to define and measure national media system development. Stevenson (1988), while not suggesting any new theory or models, recounts how the power of mass media was harnessed in developing countries after the 1960s as an integral component of Third World development efforts.

EPS Development Model

The Elite-Popular-Specialized (EPS) model of national media development postulated by Merrill and Lowenstein (1971) provides a framework to track the changing nature of the media and the varying levels of media development. It has been documented empirically by Maisel (1972), who also relates the EPS model to broader three-stage development theory in the economic and social spheres. More recently, the trend toward media fragmentation has been labeled "demassification" (Aumante, 1989). Aumante places a high value on interactivity as a desirable trait from society's point of

view. Merrill and Lowenstein conclude that the specialized stage is also the final stage of media development.

The EPS development model is structural in nature. Mediated communication normally begins with the elite stage, in which relatively few members of a society have access to media. This initial stage of development is dependent on availability of appropriate technology, and the necessary literacy to utilize it. Because media also cost money, a society in the elite stage typically has relatively few people who can afford mass media.

A society's progression to the second or popular stage is facilitated by an increasing literacy rate and the expansion of the level of affluence necessary to afford mass media. Historically, the two have been related. A society in which radios become widely used may leapfrog into the popular stage, in spite of continued illiteracy.

Four factors are necessary before a society can move to the third--specialized--stage of media development, according to Merrill and Lowenstein. These are a sizable proportion of the population educated beyond the high school level, a high level of affluence, ample leisure time, and a national population large enough to provide adequate demand for the smaller, more specialized media. At the time of their writing, Merrill and Lowenstein concluded that only one country, the United States, had reached the point where the specialized stage could commence.

The period since Merrill and Lowenstein's explication of the theory has produced an abundance of evidence that the EPS model is a good representation of media development in many countries. The most economically developed countries are now experiencing fragmentation in their media consistent with the model, and other countries have reached levels of education and affluence which support the popular stage of the cycle. In much of Europe, cable is expanding rapidly, challenging conventional

broadcast TV as a distribution channel for video programming. In the USA, network television has peaked and is losing audience to a combination of diverse cable TV channels and user-selected video alternatives.

The EPS model serves well as far as it goes, but it does not subsume a new phenomenon now technologically and economically feasible: the individualized medium. Although this might be viewed as merely the EPS model carried to its ultimate, as it is developing, the individualized mediated product has some distinct, new characteristics.

Accordingly, this paper will propose that the EPS model be extended by adding the category "individual", thus creating the EPSI model.

Specialized Stage of EPS

Although Merrill and Lowenstein do not delineate specific criteria to define specialized media or a society which has entered the specialized era, several characteristics are implicit in their discussion:

1. Identifiable, specialized audiences large enough to support media which concentrate on a limited common subject area;
2. Technological means to create media to reach such audiences, such as inexpensive printed media with shorter press runs, multiple radio stations with formats designed for homogenous niche audiences, and TV programming available to limited audiences, at least during off-peak viewing hours.
3. Diverse, fragmented subject interests which motivate citizens to seek specialized media, often driven by high educational levels.

Following their explication of the EPS model, Merrill and Lowenstein discuss patterns of behavior likely to occur in small nations which do not have the minimum population literate in a single language to support the variety of specialized media, or which have no national language of their own. These societies are likely to become "borrowers" of media developed in larger

societies, often by developing proficiency in a second language which offers a larger body of media.

In the 25 years since Merrill and Lowenstein formulated the EPS model, a number of interesting developments have taken place in mediated communication:

-- Cable television has proliferated. Most of the developed countries now have cable TV service widely available, and well over 60% of all American households now subscribe. As part of the cable service subscribers often receive local and national over-the-air channels, but they get a lot more: channels which carry nothing but sports, country music or popular music, movies, public affairs, even channels which in effect carry nothing but advertising. Most cable TV customers have their choice of several dozen channels as well as the national networks. Some of these countries also have television broadcast from satellites, providing yet another alternative.

-- The facsimile machine is everywhere, in businesses, educational institutions and thousands of homes. Home computers are often equipped to send and receive fax messages, making a separate device for that purpose unnecessary. Automated fax machines can send identical documents to multiple recipients, accomplishing in effect facsimile publishing on any scale desired by the senders.

-- Desktop publishing software has made it easy to create attractive, illustrated electronic documents which can be inexpensively printed, duplicated by copier, or sent by digital networks to narrow target audiences. The technique is only one of many made financially viable by the rapidly decreasing cost of computing.

-- Internet use is growing exponentially and shows no signs of abating. Although the quality and level of service may vary, this network is available

virtually worldwide wherever there is a public switched telephone system (PSTN) that can access other PSTNs internationally.

The Digital Revolution

Until about the time of Merrill and Lowenstein's groundbreaking explication, media were generally described and categorized in terms of technology and format, in such a way as to make the nature of the content relatively unimportant. Thus, there was this phenomenon called television, which over most of the world was assumed to mean a channel carried primarily over-the-air, and which provided entertainment and information in both aural and moving, visual form. Although it was recognized that TV could also transmit text, Europe has made only modest use of that capability, and the USA has used it very little.

Radio, a great breakthrough by any standard, developed commercially into both a medium for broadcasting to mass audiences and a point-to-point, two-way means of communication, often restricted in use due to spectrum limitations. Information on broadcast radio was limited to what could be heard.

Despite the fact that Alexander Graham Bell envisioned an audience of millions of Americans enjoying concerts by telephone, this technology was seen until very recent times almost exclusively as a channel for two-way voice communication. Business use developed first, but recent studies show that the telephone is an important instrument for social conversation (see Keller, 1977; O'Keefe & Sulanowski, 1992; Rakow, 1992; and Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976).

Merrill and Lowenstein continued to use this typology, because magazines were still magazines, radio stations were still radio stations, and so

on. Technology and format terminology continued to adequately describe the media in the specialized stage.

All of this changed when inexpensive computing power provided the means to convert any kind of information to digital form, rendering it capable of being transmitted by any electronic network. This provided the ability to transmit information by utilizing any part of the electromagnetic spectrum or any circuit capable of carrying an electrical signal.

Of course, creation of the means to transmit information in digitized form is not the same as making it technologically and economically feasible. That remained to be accomplished by the engineers, developers, business organizations, and government agencies that own and manage the world's media. In the economically advanced nations, these organizations often are privately owned, which means they are not likely to devote resources to such communication technologies until there appears to be market demand. That demand was not long in coming.

The Distinguishing Factor in Individualized Media

The essential ingredient in the individualized media stage, differentiating it from the specialized stage, is appropriate technology. All four factors cited by Merrill and Lowenstein must be present to create the conditions for the specialized stage. In other words, these four conditions are both necessary and sufficient for the specialized stage. All four conditions are necessary for the individualized stage as well, but were not sufficient until the fifth--advanced technology--appeared in the form of digitization.

Other technological developments have assisted the development of individualized media: satellite and microwave transmission, hardwired channels with expanded bandwidth such as coaxial cable and fiber optics,

packet switching, piggybacking of digital code within broadcast signals, and many more. The key, however, was digitization.

Result: Control by the User

From the user's perspective, the distinctive feature of individualized media is the element of control which the customer can exercise over the kind of information which he or she receives. During the first three stages of development of mediated communication, control over content was essentially in the hands of the individuals or organizations which originated the transmissions. Elite readers were limited to the material which book and newspaper editors chose to print and to which the editors had access. This pattern not only continued but was accentuated during the popular stage. Editors and broadcast news directors exercised considerable power, because they were the "gatekeepers" of the media and therefore the public. Totalitarian regimes that wished to control their subjects kept the media, and their content, under firm control.

Content control began to diffuse with the specialized stage, but the change was one of degree, not of kind. In free market societies, control was divided according to perceptions of market demand. If a market segment was identified which desired a different type of information, a communications medium would likely be created or adapted to serve it. If the segment prove insufficiently large or affluent enough to make the medium viable, it disappeared. However, it was the responsibility of the publishing organization and its editors to determine the demand for information, and to decide what specific information would be provided and in what form. Muddying the decision-making process were the needs of advertisers, if the medium relied on advertising as a major source of revenue.

As Merrill and Lowenstein imply, it is the demand of educated consumers for relevant information that pulls a communication system from the popular media stage into the specialized media stage. No amount of technology or affluence will bring about the transition unless the market is ready, and the educational level develops to supply this readiness. This market-pull force appears to be crucial in the transition to the individualized stage, as well. It is logical to conclude that well-educated consumers have always been looking for the kinds of information which would meet their individual needs and preferences, but patronized the centrally edited media because they were the best available to meet individual needs.

The client of communication now has direct access to an immense storehouse of information through the use of individualized communications media. Data resources are being created and expanded daily, ranging from small websites to huge national and university libraries. The daunting task is no longer getting the information from uncooperative or unsympathetic sources, it is determining where the information resides and how best to access it. The proliferation of information and access points is creating the need for consumers to be highly sophisticated, as well as possess more advanced technological tools to locate and open up the information troves.

Among the characteristics of the postindustrial age are the increasing internationalization of business and the internationalization of communication channels. The two are closely related, as business must have good communication to flourish. Increasingly, societies are finding it mutually beneficial to share information resources, instead of replicating them at the national level. International business is gradually assuming equal place beside government as an agent of power and change, and communication channels are the lifelines of big business.

Developing technologies that facilitate the individualization process are also more difficult for governments to control. Frequently, we see dissident groups using the media--often inexpensive, individualized media--to further their aims. The Iranian revolt of 1979 was assisted in no small part by the spread of information using such inexpensive technologies (Mowlana, 1996). It is relatively easy to monitor and control mass print media and broadcasting. It is much more difficult to control tape recorders, fax machines and Internet use.

Individualization of the media changes the direction and volume of information flows. No longer is the normal information flow pattern from a few centralized sources to a wide audience of recipients. Individualized media are better represented as multidirectional networks than as the more traditional spoke or concentric circle models. Graphic models look like spider webs rather than starbursts. Any participant in a communications system has the ability and potential to communicate directly with any other participant. The main purpose of the system is to provide the technical links which make communication possible. In a networked system with multiple--perhaps thousands--of alternative channels, there are no longer "bottlenecks" at which information flows can be controlled or monitored. Unlike earlier stages in the EPS development model, the individualized communication system provides every participant with the potential of being an initiator, as well as a recipient, of communication. Such a system may represent the ultimate in egalitarian communication.

Oddly, the individual stage represents a return to human speech and socialization patterns in which person-to-person communication is practiced and valued. Point-to-point technologies such as telephone and Internet make possible the kind of dialogue that has been discouraged by mass media technology. Mediated communication goes forward in time and development, only to come full circle to one-to-one communication patterns.

This time, however, there are far more choices available. An individual may choose to converse electronically with one other individual, who may be a meter or many thousands of kilometers away. Alternatively, he may choose to make his communication available to a vast audience, over a great distance, as long as the members of the audience choose to receive the message.

The difference is choice--on both ends of the communication. The communicator can choose the intended audience. Every member of that intended audience may choose whether or not to accept the message or any other message. Each member of that audience may decide whether or not to respond to the message. It may, indeed, be the final step in the conceptual development of mediated communication.

Stage of Development

At present, it may be premature to say that any country or culture is entering the individual stage of the EPSI model. Merrill and Lowenstein point out that the transition may be very subtle, and the media participants may be unaware of the transition until it is well along. It is to be expected that, as with the introduction of any new technology, a bell-shaped diffusion of innovations curve is likely to develop (Rogers, 1983). It can be argued that prior to the rapid expansion of the Internet in the last few years, the communications channels did not exist that would support broad access to individualized media. Recent experience indicates that the most advanced countries are in no more than the Early Adopter phase of the diffusion curve, if that. Until the spread of Internet use approaches maturity, that is, the Early Majority phase, predictions regarding the potential for its use are largely speculative.

Internet is not the only technology that can support individualized media, of course. Any technology that utilizes point-to-point channels and that can transmit digitized signals in adequate volume may suffice. Thus, any

nation or region with a highly developed telephone system or point-to-point wireless system, available to individual consumers, is a candidate for the individual stage of the model. In present day terms, this means that several nations in Western and Northern Europe, the United States, Japan, and Singapore, among others, may have or soon have the conditions to begin the transition to the individual stage of the EPSI model.

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